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SUBJECT: MEN PARTICIPATE IN NDI WOMEN'S FORUM FOR THE FIRST TIME

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Classified By: Poloff Masha Herbst for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The National Democratic Institute (NDI)'s fifth Women's Forum featured male speakers for the first time. The male politicians -- one pro-government, one opposition -- had mastered some progressive sound bites, but were far from fully egalitarian. Nonetheless, there has been some progress. Since March, 22 political parties have committed to increasing the percentage of women on their political party lists from the 15 percent mandated by the Electoral Code to 25 percent, and an opposition parliament member has agreed to introduce the initiative in the National Assembly in mid-October. END SUMMARY

MEN ARE FROM MARS, WOMEN SHOULD VOTE FOR WOMEN

¶2. (U) Though ostensibly from opposite sides of the political spectrum, Hrayr Karapetian of the governing coalition Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutiun) party and Khorosov Harutyunian of the opposition Christian Democratic Union had essentially the same message for the forum participants: Women's political participation is a good thing, but not necessarily here in Armenia, not necessarily now, and not necessarily outside of women's forums. "We should create an environment for women to become active in politics," Karapetian said. He followed that statement with an impassioned speech about the need to preserve Armenian traditions and the "unique definition of the Armenian woman." (COMMENT: Webster's dictionary somehow fails to elucidate this definition for us. END COMMENT)

¶3. (U) Harutyunian took a less progressive view, saying the first task for Armenian society was to understand whether women's political participation were really necessary, and adding that many Armenians would say it was not necessary. He went on to say that there were "objective reasons" that kept the number of women in politics low, such as the fact that a woman's place really was in the home. On the other hand, he said, perhaps if there were more women in power, there would be less corruption. Harutyunian singled out one forum attendee, Ruzanna Khachatrian, an opposition party politician who ran for local government against a powerful incumbent in a central Yerevan district in 2005. "I myself did not vote for her," Harutyunian said, "but you women should have." Both Harutyunian and Karapetian's parties have agreed to the Women's Forum's 25 percent quota initiative, (see paragraph 4 below), but both men advocated against it, saying that increased political participation among women

should be organic, and that society isn't ready for it. The two men conveniently left before the question and answer period brought to light the women's views on the subject -- which in fact were quite mixed.

14. (U) The Women's Forum came up with a quota initiative in March, to expand and give teeth to a legal requirement that women be included on the party lists. The Electoral Code now requires that 15 percent of each party's proportional representation (party list) candidates for the National Assembly be women. The law does not specify that the women be high enough on the lists actually to have a meaningful shot at getting elected. This rule created an instant tradition that the bottom 15 percent of every party's list (e.g. the candidates who will never be elected short of an unprecedented electoral landslide) is comprised of women. The Women's Forum's 25 percent initiative stipulates that every fourth name on each party's list should be a woman. Twenty-two parties have promised to observe this principle when drawing up their lists for the May 2007 elections, but implementation of this voluntary rule remains to be seen. Among those who have not signed on to the initiative: the Republican Party, which is the dominant member of the ruling coalition, and opposition Orinats Yerkir.

POLITICAL CONFIDENCE VARIES AMONG WOMEN

15. (C) Reactions were divided among forum participants, who included roughly 150 women political party members, NGO staff, businesswomen and government employees. Ruzanna Khachatryan, perhaps miffed at Harutyunian's dismissal of her as a candidate worthy only of women's votes, railed back at

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the by-now absent party leader during the comment portion of the event, eliciting laughter when she said it was "just like a man to say something about women, and then escape." Khachatryan, who is press secretary to the People's Party of Armenia's Stepan Demirchian, disagreed that women lose elections because their demographic doesn't step up to the ballot box. She, and many other women, blamed unfair elections for the lack of women in government. Khachatryan also was one of the more grounded and sober women who spoke. She said that, while it certainly wasn't a bad thing that 22 parties had accepted the 25 percent quota, the one party that mattered, the ruling Republicans, had not. Khachatryan said that forum members could celebrate their success only after the Republicans accepted the quota. (NOTE: According to NDI Co-Director Taline Sanassarian, that won't happen anytime soon. Not long after NDI approached the parties to accept the non-binding quota initiative, a woman MP from the Republicans paid a visit to Sanassarian and told her that the Republicans would never adopt such a "stupid" initiative. END NOTE.)

16. (C) While Khachatryan is among a small percentage of women who believe that Armenian women are ready for political participation right now, many others are less certain, Sanassarian said. She said the bulk of the forum members believed women were not yet ready to participate, or that only some women were ready to participate. She said despite the lack of widespread political confidence, the Women's Forum had made great strides in creating a sustainable network of women who are interested in the political process, and in building confidence to inspire some of them to consider becoming political leaders.

17. (C) The 25 percent quota initiative is one example of the success of the forum, Sanassarian said, even if it doesn't make its way into the Electoral Code, because it was an organic product of the Women's Forum. The opposition Democratic Party's Aram Sargsian has agreed to propose the initiative as a change in the Electoral Code in mid-October. Sanassarian also said that, whether or not the initiative

becomes law, the number of women in politics will increase if the 22 parties actually follow through on their promise to put women in every fourth slot on their party rolls.

COMMENT

18. (C) Though the male party leaders said some of the right things, their underlying attitude towards the role of women in politics was clear, and it reflects the mentality of a majority of voting public. According to the results of an August 2006 Gallup Poll commissioned by the International Republican Institute, many others agree: Nearly two-thirds of poll respondents -- 53 percent of which were women -- said that, all other things being equal, they would vote for a man over a woman, while only six percent said they would vote for the woman, and 28 percent said it did not matter. Given the biases ingrained in Armenian society, the chance that the National Assembly will adopt the 25 percent initiative is slim. Small but substantive change is possible, however, if the parties that signed on to the initiative honor their promises.
GODFREY